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REAL STORY TOLD OF WRECKED VESSEL

One of the most exciting and little known chapters of Truro history is referred to in the previous story — in which the Town in 1778, got a physician from the wrecked British warship, Somerset. What is extraordinary however, about this important item from the American Revolution, frequently referred to in the history books, is the almost total lack of surviving local information about it.

What happen in Truro that wild November night when a Northeaster — and a snowstorm — drove the Somerset on Peaked Hill Bar? This reporter, who has tracked down likely local sources in an effort to find out, has not succeeded. Yet Truro by 1778 had been an incorporated Town for nearly 70 years, it had "lettered" citizens who kept public records, and surely what happened that night must have had more impact on the Town than anything that has happened since!

First of all, how did 480 British seamen, marines and naval officers get ashore alive — and without help! — in that howling Northeaster? Everyone familiar with the back shore in a north-east storm would find such a deliverance difficult to imagine. Having got ashore, how did the British find their way across trackless dunes in the black of night — and in a storm to boot — to a light and a habitation? (A Coast Guardsman in World War II told this reporter that he and several crew members on foot, had actually become lost during broad daylight in the Truro-Provincetown dunes).

And when the 480 British survivors marched themselves to a

habitation that night, whose house was it? What thunder-struck Truroite went to his door to find a company of wet, shivering, half-frozen British waiting to surrender? And who put the British up that night? Where were quarters found for all of them? Dry clothing, perhaps? Hot food? The population was sparse and homes some distance apart.

Granted that the British weren't popular here, and that the local folk must have rejoiced to learn that the deadly Somerset was wrecked on their shores, there was nevertheless a strong, local tradition about shipwrecked seamen. The Town treated them kindly — with the greatest of charity for those fortunate enough to reach shore. Yet houses, by and large, were relatively small, with little spare rooms for guests. Supplies, too, must have been short. The community was badly hit from three years of war and the British blockading of Massachusetts waters. Where did Truro find shelter for 480 unexpected guests that night? And where did local housewives find food for them?

The British were later marched under guard to Boston, but it appears to have been a most charitably conducted march, and many of the British dropped out along the way, to find homes and become permanent members of Cape communities. Manpower was drained from the towns and an able-bodied prisoner would probably have had little trouble convincing a Cape farmer of his usefulness. After being shot at in a war, cooped up on the Somerset — to say nothing of being shipwrecked on Peaked Hill Bar! — many a British soldier or sailor must have dropped down gratefully along the road to Boston and decided to throw in his lot with the Yankees!

In one reference to the wreck of the Somerset, this reporter read that the man-of-war would have had around 3,000 men on board when she foundered — marines, seamen and captured American prisoners. She was "a great frigate" with 64 guns. The Somerset was enroute from Newport, R.I., to rendezvous with other units of the British fleet outside Boston Harbor — there to attack D'Estaing's French fleet guarding Boston, and drive it out to sea. Instead the Somerset foundered

and the storm blew the British fleet out of position for a proper attack on the French.

Esther Forbes' Pulitzer Prize-winning book, "Paul Revere and the World He Lived In," has considerable to say about the wreck of the Somerset but throws no light, either, on what happened in Truro the night of the wreck — or what reception the Town gave those 480 survivors. Esther Forbes says: "The breakers rolled up a hundred more (bodies) for the fishermen to bury." But there must have been many more than a hundred bodies washed ashore! Shebnah Rich, a diligent researcher, has no information to offer, either, though his record of the Town goes back much farther — to its very beginnings.

You can find Truro records of property of 1779 in Probate Court — well-written documents — yet nowhere has this researcher found a local account of what must have been an unforgettable event here. You can only conclude that many old records were lost or destroyed — leaving large gaps perhaps, in local history.

Esther Forbes writes of the Somerset: "The carcass of the ship was picked over by the industrious inhabitants who then attempted to burn her. The wreck lay unmolested except for the beating of the waves and the pilfering of the Cape Codders, from November to March, when Paul Revere was put in charge of mounting her cannon for the further defense of Boston." Paul Revere succeeded in getting 21 of her big guns off the Somerset — and "hoped to get more," Miss Forbes adds.

There must have been some respectable loot on the Somerset — nor could the local folk be blamed for helping themselves to it, considering the hardship the British fleet had imposed on them.